



Sylvester Stallone has assembled a “Who’s Who” of action hero stars for his latest film “The Expendables”, an old fashioned action adventure that is heavy on the action and as light as a feather as far as plot and character development goes. None of this is a surprise, of course, which means my expectations were sufficiently lowered to the point where I could sit back and enjoy the carnage.

It’s almost like the NBA All-Star game. You’re there to watch the flash and the dazzle, knowing full well that it doesn’t resemble an actual NBA game. With “The Expendables”, it was the same concept; you aren’t there to see anyone showing off their acting skill, even though there were several members of the cast with true acting ability (including Stallone). Nope...this one has as much chance of being nominated for an Oscar as LeBron James has of winning a popularity contest in Cleveland.

But that’s OK, because the action is absolutely balls-to-the-wall and almost nonstop. It kicks right off with Barney Ross’s (Stallone) gang of mercenaries hired to deliver a ransom to a cargo ship captured by Somali pirates. Naturally, the pirates are stupid and demand even more money, giving the good guys an opportunity to start right out by brutally slaughtering all of them...without so much as a scratch to any of the hostages.

It is a pretty small team, something that surprised me based on the names on the credit list. There are only six of them on the team, but most important is Ross's trusted second in command Lee Christmas (Jason Statham). The names of the others aren't much more inventive; Ying Yang (Jet Li), Gunner Jensen (Dolph Lundgren), Hale Ceasar (Terry Crews), and Toll Road (Randy Couture). Back at their quasi-headquarters lives a former member, Tool (Mickey Rourke), who now runs a tattoo parlor and waxes poetically about all the lives he's taken and the women he's bedded.

The Big Job is set up in the one scene with Bruce Willis as a mysterious CIA agent. He knows of two groups of mercenaries capable of doing the job he wants done; assassinating a military dictator in a small South American island nation. The other group is never seen per se, but they are led by none other than Arnold Schwarzenegger, leading to what might be the best three minutes of the movie; the banter between the two action legends, with Willis playing straight man as Ah-nuld passes on the job. Sadly, this is the only scene for Willis and Ah-nuld, but that was something I totally expected.

The rest of the movie is The Mission, which first involves Ross and Christmas flying down on a reconnaissance flight to scout out the target. This allows for a (very) little character development and a couple of good scenes between Stallone and Statham, as well as a set up of the bad guys; General Garza (David Zayas, who plays Det. Angel Batista on "Dexter"), a standard banana republic strong man propped up by a shady American bad guy (Eric Roberts) and his muscle headed henchman (Steve Austin).

I'm not sure that there was one development in this movie that wasn't totally predictable, but it still was a lot of fun to watch, including the last 30 minutes, which may be the most awesome display of special effects pyrotechnical overkill that I have ever seen. Completely unrealistic; but impossible not to like. One interesting choice from Stallone as the director and co-writer was his decision to go low tech for his team. There are no elaborate plans (like "The A-Team"), no computers, no 21st century heavy equipment; just lots of guns, lots of C4 explosives, and lots of knives...leading to lots of bloody kills.

Due to the relatively short hour and forty-two minute run time, character development is almost nonexistent. Stallone is a sad loner with a soft spot for a damsel in distress. Statham has a girl that he is sweet on at home, but she doesn't know what he does for a living, and then finds someone else while he's gone for a month (the guy she finds is a jerk...so guess what happens there). Lundgren is an out of control drug user, and Li has issues with being short. That's all

the room we have for learning about these people, so all we know about Crews, Couture, and Austin is that they like to kill people.

Stallone as an action hero hasn't lost that much, although he does seem to finally acknowledge the slowing effect of time, even if he does still try to mask his 60 plus years with a lot of hair dye, fake tattoos, and his much reported upon performance enhancement drug molded body...which quite frankly looks very unnatural right now. In any case, I found it interesting that he lets Li and Statham take on the majority of the hand-to-hand fighting scenes, while the mano-y-mano battle against the big, bad Stone Cold Steve Austin was handled by Randy Couture.

All in all, this was a movie that in so many ways completely misses the boat, with horrible writing, one dimensional characters, and the abuse of every single action movie cliché ever invented.

But you don't watch the NBA All-Star game for the defense, passing, and strategy...you watch it for the fun of watching the participants showing off their best skills. That is all that this movie has going for it...but that's enough to make it well worth watching for any self respecting macho movie fan.

My Rating: Bill Nelsen (2 ½ Footballs)